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A COMPARISON OF THE KNOXVILLE AND NEW ORLEANS WORLD'S FAIRS

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ABSTRACT

Comparisons are naturally made between Knoxville and New Orleans. Knoxville had a better attendance record than New Orleans. The reason being vacation patterns, socio-economic status, theme, and location. The impact on Knoxville was a one time opportunity to develop image. The impact on New Orleans was just another opportunity to develop image.

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INTRODUCTION

This article is based on the author's visits to both the 1982 Knoxville and the 1984 New Orleans "World's Fairs". The experiences of attending these two "Expositions" (neither was an official "World's Fair") indicated that they had many similarities and differences. The one great difference was most obviously the level of attendance at the two fairs. Knoxville had, what was claimed to be, adequate attendance and "broke even". New Orleans, at the time of this article, was falling significantly below attendance projections and was loosing millions of dollars. The big question is why?

It is hard to imagine how different the visit to the Louisiana World Exposition, or as it is locally termed, the New Orleans World's Fair, was in terms of crowds and lines. I vividly remember the hundreds of buses and the jostling crowds from Knoxville, during my late summer visit to the Knoxville fairgrounds. In New Orleans I drove into a parking lot adjacent to the fair and found it ninety percent empty at 12 noon. Once inside the fairgrounds, the place looked absolutely deserted. The day before, August 27, the fair had it's worst attendance day--14,372 people. In comparison, the worst day at Knoxville was 23,000 people. These figures look even worse when the New Orleans newspaper, The Times

Picayune , reported that the fair needed an average daily attendance of 61,156 people for the last 75 days of the fair in order to break even financially. At the present rate of attendance, the fair will probably fall about 2 million people short of its goal of 9.2 million. This is a very serious problem when one considers that 75 percent of the fair's operating money comes from attendance admissions.

VACATION PATTERNS

There are four reasons that may explain the tremendous attendance problems at the New Orleans World's Fair. First, it's hard to change people's summer travel patterns. Knoxville had the advantage of being in the middle of the Great Smoky's resort area: The Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Gatlinburg, Pigeon Forge, and a number of other attractions. This is a prime summer vacation destination area. People were naturally drawn to the Knoxville area for the fair and other activities during the summer of 1982. On the other hand, New Orleans is certainly not a popular place to go during the summer months. The oppressive heat and humidity of a New Orleans summer help make places like Cape Cod and the Smoky Mountains popular vacation spots. The promoters of the New Orleans fair may have thought that they could change people's summer travel patterns and help boost the normally slow New Orleans's summer tourist economy. At present it appears that they were wrong.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS

The second reason may have been the promoter's mistake in underestimating the poverty of the local area. The fair was counting on a large local attendance and is not getting it. Attendance by people who live within 150 miles of New Orleans is way off. This area is quite poor and the recent problems in the petroleum industry have not helped. A family visit to the fair is not an inexpensive experience when the prices of such items as parking, food, and souvenirs are added to the \$15.00 price of admission tickets. This experience, as at most theme parks, is not within economic reach of many lower income families.

THEME

The third reason for attendance problems may lie in the similarities of the themes of both the Knoxville and New Orleans fairs. Both fairs had technologically oriented themes; energy for Knoxville and rivers and water for New Orleans. These themes were carried out in the international pavillion's exhibitions, which are the backbone of any fair. At Knoxville it became quite boring to look at exhibits of hydro-electric dams, nuclear power generators and coal mines. After viewing the tenth nuclear generator, you really did not care if it was English, French, Japanese or Italian. The same situation, but to a lesser degree, existed in New Orleans. The theme of water was demonstrated through exhibits of irrigation projects, dams, lakes and

canals in the various pavillions. Once again, this is not the most entertaining subject matter. The difference was in those pavillions and exhibits that chose to show some of the unique culture and characteristics of their land and people. Dr. Jack B. Samuels, noted authority on theme parks and world's fairs, has observed that, "it is the culture and not the technology of a country that people find interesting." This is true, and it was those pavillions that showed their land, people or culture that made the fair interesting. One big exception as the NASA exhibit of the space shuttle Enterprise. It was certainly a unique and interesting technological exhibit.

LOCATION

The fourth reason may be in the timing and location of the New Orleans fair in comparison to the Knoxville fair. Both fairs were in the southeastern United States within two years of each other. This coupled to the similar technological themes may have made the New Orleans fair a non-unique product in the eyes of the millions of people who attended the fair in Knoxville but chose not to go to New Orleans. A basic concept in marketing any product is to have something unique in the eyes of the potential customer. It appears that millions of potential customers felt that the New Orleans fair had nothing new to offer them.

There were many interesting and unique things at the New Orleans fair that people may not have known about: the aquacade show, the Vatican exhibit, the great cajun and creole food, the wonder wall, the great shows in the amphitheatre, and the entertainment on Fulton Street. These and not the technological exhibits are what made this fair a unique experience. The one big difference between the two fairs was that the New Orleans fair really succeeded in creating that great honky-tonk "French Quarter" atmosphere at the fair complete with all the booze, cajun food, and jazz music.

PROMOTION SUCCESS

The promoters of the New Orleans World Exposition instituted some unique discounts to lure local people to the fair. Perhaps the most attractive ones was the early evening and late night discounts. These included an \$8 admission price after 6 p.m. and a \$2 admission after 10 p.m. To offset the expected drop-off in attendance during the Labor Day weekend, a special \$5 discount was available to fair visitors on Labor Day.

The late night discounted admission of \$2 made the fair a popular place to go at night for local residents. If the rest of the country is not attending and enjoying the fair, the people of New Orleans certainly have been. While the fairgrounds appear to be empty during the day, the Fulton Street area of the fair, which features bars, music and nightlife, is jammed during the night with local people having fun at "their fair". This may be the one real up-beat aspect of this enterprise, that the people of New Orleans really do love their fair and have had fun with it. But then, New Orleans was always good at putting on a party.

IMPROVEMENTS

There are a number of things that could have been done to help make the fair a success. First of all the promoters could have changed the dates of the fair to correspond to the New Orleans convention season, Sugar Bowl, and Mardi Gras. This would have meant starting the fair after Labor Day and running through February. This would not have helped the local tourist economy, which is busy this time of year, but it would have helped fair attendance.

The other thing that could have been done was to market the uniqueness of New Orleans along with the fair. New Orleans, with its music, food, and nightlife, is one of the most unique and entertaining cities in our country. It is this wonderful city that could have been as much an attraction to visitors as is, or was, the fair.

When a city goes to the trouble of sponsoring an event as ambitious as a world's fair, some questions that must be raised are the long term social, economic and psychological impacts on the city. In Knoxville, the fair was a very big production in a "small" city that was trying very hard to change its image. Knoxville had the opportunity to improve its highway system, clean-up a section of downtown, and play host to millions of people. It was a unique opportunity for a little known city to show itself off. In the case of New Orleans, it has become a matter of a city that tried to throw a "party that went bust."

I predict that even with all the negative publicity about the fair, the prospect of losing over twenty million dollars and the embarrassment of throwing a party that only a "few" people bothered to attend, there will be little lasting social or psychological impact on the city of New Orleans. Whereas Knoxville had a once in a lifetime chance to host large numbers of tourists at a special event, New Orleans does it at least twice every year during the Sugar Bowl and at Mardi Gras. To the people of New Orleans this may be just a bad experience to be forgotten by the time New Year's comes around.

On the positive side the city stands to gain economically from the urban development along the riverfront where the fair is located. The permanent development includes a new convention center, the addition of the Fulton Street entertainment area and both new and renovated hotel space. Many of these projects may not have happened without the fair. Only time will tell how much impact this new development will have on the community.